Christian-Muslim Relations 600 - 1500

Oruʿutō luqbal ʿamō d-Arābōyē

(1,163 words)

Dispute against the nation ***of*** the ArabsA response addressed to the Arabs

Dionysius bar Ṣalibi

Date: Unknown; before 1171
Original Language: Syriac

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Description

The *Dispute against the Arabs* (designated as *Arabōyē*, *Ṭayyōyē*, *Mhaggrōyē*) belongs to a series ***of*** refutations which includes non-Jacobite Christian communities (Nestorians, Chalcedonians, Armenians), 'Idolaters', Phantasiasts, and the Jews, which originally may have formed one large heresiographical work. The tone ***of*** some ***of*** these refutations, especially ***of*** the Armenians and the Chalcedonians, is extremely polemical. In this respect, its refutation ***of*** the Muslims is more balanced and detached.

The *Dispute* is divided into three parts (*mēmrē*): *memrō* I, 8 chapters; *memrō* II, 16 chapters; *memrō* III, 6 chapters.

Memrō I begins with a section on Muḥammad and the rise ***of*** Islam, comparable to the account given by Dionysius ***of*** Tell-Maḥrē (q.v.). It is followed by an original description ***of*** the four main Muslim 'heresies' (Sunnīs, Shīʿīs, Khārijīs and Muʿtazila[1]) and a discussion ***of*** the different names given to each group, as well as ***of*** the Syriac translations ***of*** these Arabic appellations.

Next follows a discussion ***of*** God's Unity and Trinity on the basis ***of*** scriptural, natural and philosophical arguments and an analysis ***of*** the terms *ousia* and *hypostasis*, the concepts ***of*** sonship and fatherhood and a discussion ***of*** the (un)createdness ***of*** the Word ***of*** God.

Memrō II deals with issues related to the Incarnation ***of*** God the Word and formulates brief answers to various (standard) Muslim objections (e.g. How can God be limited by entering a womb? When God was among us, who governed the universe? Did the Virgin not give birth to three hypostases if the divinity is one?). The second theme ***of*** this *memrō* is Christ's death, discussed from the perspective ***of*** God's foreknowledge and the question ***of*** God being the cause ***of*** evil. Next follows a discussion ***of*** various subjects (Christ's divinity, the properties ***of*** the individual hypostases ***of*** Father, Son and Spirit). As a conclusion to these intellectual arguments, Dionysius gives the testimonies ***of*** prophets and some pagan philosophers affirming the mystery ***of*** the Incarnation ***of*** the Son.

The next theme ***of*** this *memrō* is the prophethood ***of*** Muḥammad, which the author rejects with some classical arguments (there are no testimonies about his prophethood in the scriptures, the impossibility ***of*** Muḥammad being the Paraclete, the Qur'an contradicting the Torah and the Gospel) and original arguments such as an analysis ***of*** the terms *nbiyā* ('prophet') and *rasūl* ('messenger').

The last chapters ***of*** this *memrō* are devoted to a variety ***of*** subjects such as the direction ***of*** prayer, an explanation ***of*** why Christians gird their waists with a belt, the ***veneration of*** the bones ***of saints*** and ***of*** the (wood ***of*** the) cross, the reality ***of*** the crucifixion, the interpretation ***of*** the Old Testament 'camel and ass' (see Isaiah 21:7) understood as referring to Muḥammad and Jesus, the accusation ***of*** *taḥrīf* ***of*** the Christian scriptures and contradictions in the Qur'an, the issue ***of*** circumcision, the interpretation ***of*** the terms Christians (Naṣrōyē, Nazarenes, the 'spiritually victorious') and Islam, the problem that Muḥammad did not perform miracles, and finally a comparison between the ascetic ideals ***of*** the Christians and the immorality ***of*** Muḥammad, as well as the materialistic description ***of*** paradise in the Qur'an.

Memrō III gives a substantial selection ***of*** qur'anic passages translated into Syriac, followed by a commentary/refutation in which certain themes dealt with in the first two *memrē* are taken up again. Bar Ṣalibi shows some familiarity with traditional Islamic exegetical interpretations and he refers to a work, the *Maghāzī*, on 'the actions and battles ***of*** Muḥammad', and to another called the *Mukhtāra*, which reports on the 'appearance' or 'figure', 'image' (*yuqneh*) ***of*** Muḥammad, presumably a reference to the *sīra* literature.

The qur'anic quotations given here are often at variance with the received text ***of*** the Qur'an. Mingana ascribes this to personal interpretations and interpolations by the Syriac translator, who, in his view, was not Dionysius bar Ṣalibi himself, as well as to the fact that the Syriac translation represents a redaction ***of*** the Qur'an predating the 10th century, when the standard text became generally disseminated. It is to be noted that *memrē* I and II also contain important qur'anic quotations the text ***of*** which is sometimes not identical with the same citation found in *memrō* III.

A study ***of*** the sources used by Dionysius and a systematic comparison with other refutation texts is still to be carried out. The intention ***of*** the work is to provide the reader with clear-cut arguments against classical Muslim objections to Christian beliefs. The author's personal experience ***of*** debating with Muslims is reflected in his remark that it is only recommended to discuss with 'the intelligent and wise' among the Muslims and certainly not with the 'legalists', i.e. the Sunnīs, who, in his opinion, have the same view about Christ as Arius.

Significance

Bar Ṣalibi's *Dispute against the Arabs* is the most comprehensive refutation ***of*** Islam written in Syriac. It discusses all traditional themes found in the Syriac and Christian Arabic refutation literature, often repeating the classical interpretation found in earlier works. In addition, it shows an unusual familiarity with internal Muslim divisions (*memrō* I, ch. 2), gives Syriac equivalents for Muslim technical terms and is the sole work to give large fragments ***of*** the Qur'an in a Syriac translation.

The work was not only read in the West Syrian tradition, but was also appreciated by the East Syrians.

Manuscripts

Most ***of*** these are listed by Amar in his edition and translation.

To his list should be added:

a MS in the possession ***of*** Raban Eliyo Oztas ***of*** Mor Afrem Monastery, Glanerbrug, written in Damascus in 1754

a MS in the possession ***of*** Raban Said Cakici ***of*** Mor Afrem Monastery, Glanerbrug, copied in 1983 in Mezizaḥ

a MS in the possession ***of*** Hori Gabriel Kaya, copied in 1997 in Hengelo by the owner

a MS in the possession ***of*** the Reverend Samuel Essen ***of*** Enschede (no date)

(information from Gabriel Rabo, Göttingen).

Editions & Translations

J.P. Amar, *Dionysius bar Ṣalībī. A response to the Arabs* (*CSCO* 614-15), Louvain, 2005 (Syriac text and English trans.)

Studies

R. Ebied, ‘The Syriac polemical treatises *of* Dionysius Bar Salibi, Metropolitan *of* Amid (d. 1171 A.D.)’, *Pd’O* 31 (2006) 57-61

Amar, *Dionysius barṢalībī*, trans., pp. V-XII

S. Griffith, ‘Disputes with Muslims in Syriac Christian texts. From Patriarch John (d. 648) to Bar Hebraeus (d. 1286)’, in B. Lewis and F. Niewöhner (eds), *Religiongespräche im Mittelalter*, Wiesbaden, 1992, 251-73, pp. 268-69

S. Griffith, ‘Dionysius bar Ṣalibi on the Muslims’, in H. Drijvers (ed.), *IV Symposium Syriacum 1984*, Rome, 1987, 353-65

A. Mingana, ‘An ancient Syriac translation *of* the Kur’ān exhibiting new verses and variants’, *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 9 (1925) 188-235

Keywords

Chronological Category: 1100-1200
Genre & Source Type: Heresiography
Theme: Christian portrayal *of* Muhammad, Crucifixion, Free Will and Predestination, Incarnation, Paradise, Polemic on Quran, Prayer, Qibla, Tahrif, Translation *of* Quran, Trinity, Unity *of* God
Christians: Jacobites

Herman G.B. Teule

Notes

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